Concise, critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies

Marc Gotlieb

The Deaths of Henri Regnault

The first English-language book on this mid-nineteenth-century French painter, The Deaths of Henri Regnault will become an important reference with its many leads for art historians to pursue. Its first four chapters examine Regnault's decade-long career, which took off when he won the Prix de Rome in 1866 and ended with his death in 1871; the final three examine his posthumous reputation until World War I, when it precipitously declined. Marc Gotlieb's attempt to revive Regnault's critical fortunes is laudable but hampered by a tendency to accept and extend Third Republic propaganda that lionized the artist.

In Rome, the setting of chapter 1, Regnault found freedom from the strictures of the École des Beaux-Arts, where he trained from 1861 until 1865. Yet clearly Regnault continued to define his project in Parisian terms, even from afar. This alternative narrative is one we must read in-between the lines of Gotlieb's text, where Regnault's quest for originality is presented as more of a heroic struggle than a strategic operation. Although Gotlieb's introduction briefly suggests the Parisian origins of Regnault's quest (6-7), the impact and continuing innovations of the academic painters he originally aspired to emulate—Jean-Léon Gérôme and Regnault's mentor Alexandre Cabanel—are not examined in subsequent chapters. Nor does Gotlieb seek to examine the ways the recent Parisian order moral (moral order). Coincidentally, the release of Gotlieb's book falls on a similar precipice in American politics, between the progressive, inclusionary politics of the Obama administration and the reactionary "law and order" climate of the Trump administration. Although Gotlieb's historiographical analysis pays scant attention to changes in political context, these are key to understanding his subject and the book itself.

Early biographers framed Regnault's Mediterranean travels as "a quest for the sun" (39). In chapter 2, Gotlieb amends these accounts by arguing that Regnault was in pursuit of the sublime, not of the sun. Gotlieb's thinking is largely textual and fragmentary; the author builds his case by discerning traces of this concept in travelers' accounts by Regnault's predecessors Eugène Fromentin and Gustave Guillaumet (47–58). Although tropes of the sublime may exist in these and in Regnault's works on paper, but they depict finite spaces and lack the vastness often associated with sublime vistas.

Most readers will immediately turn to chapter 3, which examines Regnault's well-known painting, Salomé, like that of Édouard Manet's Olympia. Gotlieb argues that the painting, exhibited at the Salon of 1870, was a powerful space for viewers' projection of their own fantasies (84). Yet the content of Regnault's painting is highly specific, if not overdetermined, by its title (omitted from Gotlieb's account) in the Salon catalog: Salomé, la danseuse, tenant le bassin et le coutau qui doivent servir à la décollation de saint Jean-Baptiste (Salomé, the dancer, holding the basin and the knife that would be used for the beheading of St. John the Baptist). Its shock value was likely due to the painting's lack of ambiguity, rather than to the openness Gotlieb ascribes to the painting (84). Regnault's extended descriptive title highlights the specificity of the subject's physiognomy, which departs from the conventional idealized feminine type. It is the gaze of Regnault's Salomé, that puts the painting over the top, as Gotlieb notes, implicating us in its fantasy and placing us in a locale at once distant
and too close for comfort (102–3). Yet, the figure of Salomé and her surroundings lack the ambiguity of Olympia, which Nancy Locke has identified in Manet and the Family Romance (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) as key to the painting’s charge. In this respect, Salomé was more akin to Gustave Courbet’s paintings in that her physiognomy was so particularized it spawned numerous speculations about the sitter’s relationship to the painter (84–92).

In chapter 4, Gotlieb interprets Exécution sans jugement sous les rois maures de Grenade (1870) as the culmination of the painter’s interest in the sublime, a claim worth reconsideration. This section examines the Moroccan settings of Regnault’s fantasies at length; the Parisian origins of the painting are little discussed, despite the assertion that it represents a fantasy about the horror of the guillotine (118–123). Although Regnault borrowed the background of his painting from his ostensibly sublime watercolors made in southern Spain, the painting, Regnault’s third envoi, was, in fact, made in Paris and not abroad, since Regnault had yet to begin the painting upon his return to France in August 1870 (105). Although Gotlieb expands upon this chapter in his essay “The Guillotine Sublime” in Is Paris Still the Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Essays on Art and Modernity, 1850–1900 (New York: Routledge, 2016), neither essay provides the needed context specific to the Second Empire. Rather than Eugène Delacroix’s Execution of the Doge of Marino Faliero (1826), which the author presents as an important precedent, Regnault needed to look no further for inspiration than Gérôme’s 7 décembre 1815; neuf heures du matin (1867), known today as the Execution of Marshal Ney, exhibited at the 1868 Salon. Future inquiries may want to consider both paintings in relation to the matter-of-fact, macabre theater of the Parisian morgue, a tourist attraction that had reopened in 1864, where the recently deceased were on display for up-close viewing, including, on occasion, a decapitated body.

In his remaining three chapters, Gotlieb compiles a wealth of information about Regnault’s reception during the Third Republic. He examines the earliest biographies of 1872, the painter’s posthumous retrospective exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts of the same year, and numerous other commemorations circulated as images and as monuments. In chapter 7, the year 1878 is identified as a tipping point in the collapse of Regnault’s Parisian reputation (233), although interest in the artist was lasted longer in the United States, thanks to the acquisition of Automédon by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1890 (235–41) and Salomé by the Metropolitan Museum in 1916 (242–50).

A very different artist and legacy would have emerged had Gotlieb attended more carefully to political context. For example, Regnault was, in fact, engaged with the politics of his time, despite Gotlieb’s portrayal of him as somewhat of a Greenbergian formalist. In one instance, Gotlieb describes Juan Prim, 8 octobre 1868 as emblematic of “Regnault’s embrace of the Spanish school” (34). However, the painting depicts a general who successfully conspired against Queen Isabella II and forced her abdication and exile to France. As Brigitte Olivier-Cyssau established in her essay “Histoire d’un tableau d’histoire” in La lettre et l’oeuvre (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2009) it’s an irrefutably political work. A lack of historicization also affects our understanding of the differences between the various recounts of Regnault’s death. Whereas Henri Baillère and Henri Cazalis published biographies of the artist in 1872, George Clairin’s second-hand retellings were published in 1889 and 1906 by which time a significantly different context—glossed over in Gotlieb’s book—was in place. Although political events are discussed in the book’s second half, the larger context is only touched on, leaving important background, such as the “revanchist fervor of the 1880s and 1890s,” unexplained (196).

When historians illuminate the mechanics of past narratives, we open up history to new possibilities. Yet Gotlieb professes a lack of interest when it comes to laying bare ideology (43). As I write in early 2017, such a stance seems no longer tenable. No matter the political climate, disinterest is little excuse for perpetuating nationalist mythologies. A social ground would have rectified many of the book’s thorny problems, which would have allowed the standpoints of the artist and his storytellers to be made explicit, as well as opened up space for alternative, less privileged points of view. A bibliography is surprisingly absent, which limits the book’s usefulness, especially for undergraduates, and renders opaque the scholarly conversations to which Gotlieb is indebted. Otherwise, as Gotlieb notes, Regnault uncannily resembles that archetypal scholar that props up such heroes.

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